

A Platform for Women

Women in fisheries can utilize the SSF Guidelines to advance their interests, even as they relate to one another and build up solidarity and a common vision

Over the last several years, many fishworker organizations have been engaged in spreading awareness among the fishing communities on the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines). It is certainly a tool that can be used to advance the sustainability of small-scale fisheries, if sufficient pressure is applied on governments, despite the fact that there has been a massive change in the sector.

In India, in 2016, the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF) had organized a large national workshop to discuss the provisions of the SSF Guidelines with women in fisheries from various states (provinces). A follow-up workshop was organized in August 2019, this time focusing on states where women are better organized, in order to help them take the discussion towards concrete action. This was also in the backdrop of the National Policy on Marine Fisheries (NPMF), which was notified in late 2017 by the Government of India.

PS from the Central Institute of Fisheries Education, (CIFE), Mumbai. Thirty women leaders from the states of West Bengal, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and Kerala got together for this three-day session.

The August workshop began with women sharing their activities and the issues they face in the workplace in their respective states. It was encouraging to see that women's organizing capacity in these states has progressed substantially and that they have been making their demands heard either through public demonstrations or by constantly applying pressure on the administration to safeguard their rights. Women's leadership is growing and is building links among women across districts. It was also clear that the socio-economic situation of women varied from state to state, with women in Maharashtra being the most advanced, followed by Kerala, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal. The variation in socio-economic situation also has to do with differences in fisheries across states. The first step was to help women not only to understand these differences but also to help them relate to one another, in order to build solidarity and a common vision.

While analysing NPMF, it was apparent that women do not even figure in the preamble. Although gender justice is mentioned as one of the pillars of the overall strategy, NPMF recognizes only post-harvest activities of women. It does not take into account other activities along the fisheries value chain that are performed by women. Nikita Gopal tried to emphasize and discuss those areas where gender mainstreaming could be advocated to benefit women. The reference to tenure rights of traditional fishermen under fisheries

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It was deemed necessary to understand whether or not there was convergence of this national policy with the provisions of the SSF Guidelines.

The session was organized in collaboration with Nikita Gopal from the Central Institute of Fisheries Technology (CIFT), Kochi, and Ananthan

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Group photo of National Workshop on The SSF Guidelines and Mainstreaming Gender into Fisheries Policies and Legislation, YWCA, Chennai, India, 18-20 August, 2019. The group decided to create a national platform to design a mechanism to take up national issues

management, for example, could be broadened to also include secure tenure rights to fisherwomen. Areas can be reserved not only for traditional fishers under NPMF but also for fisherwomen to undertake traditional fish-drying activities. Territorial use rights, which are tenure rights, could thus pertain to water as well as to the rights of women over specific land areas to undertake fish-drying operations. In the case of mariculture, while encouraging small fishing communities, fishermen's groups and fishery co-operatives, fisherwomen's groups or co-operatives could also be created and encouraged to undertake and benefit from mariculture operations.

The education level of fishing communities was rising on the whole but still remains below the state average. The education status of women was below that of men, it was noted. Nikita Gopal indicated certain pockets where the education levels are falling. The premature death of the male parent often led to young boys being forced into fishing and leaving school. Also, the participation of mothers in fish vending led girls

to drop out of school to take care of the family. In addition, poor access to educational institutions, located far away from home according to a sample study as reported to the workshop, led to dropping out of school. Health-related issues appeared to be common across states for women and were mainly related to the occupation of fish vending/fish processing, lack of water and sanitation infrastructure or just living at a distance from healthcare facilities.

The session on tenure rights and fisheries management highlighted the difference between the gender perspective in the NPMF and the SSF Guidelines and the need for women to use the latter to advocate for their rights. To do this effectively, it is important to better understand various terms and concepts such as 'the ecosystem-based approach', 'management', 'co-management' of fisheries resources, the 'value chain', and 'biodiversity conservation', as understanding of these terms is part of the requisite knowledge in engaging with fisheries issues while asserting their rights. Understanding these concepts would

help if women seek to make their claim included in management committees and to integrate issues that also affect their lives, in general.

After giving a broad outline on the gender budget, Ananthan PS talked about the budget allocations in the fisheries department. The Central Government has instructed that at least 30 per cent or nearly one-third of the funds under state programmes should go to women beneficiaries or to women-oriented programmes. Up to 2017-18, there were more than a dozen schemes under the Central Government. In 2018-2019, though, several schemes have been amalgamated under one called the 'Blue Revolution' scheme.


Although clarity is still required on the specificities of allocations, there is a 75 per cent grant-in-aid to self-help groups (SHGs) of women for the creation of modern hygienic fish-marketing infrastructure. This is available for retail fish markets and transportation infrastructure. Women were to be made to understand how they can demand budget allocations at the state level and how these allocations can be utilized. Ananthan highlighted how various state governments demanded and utilized the Central funds. Although women leaders were aware of the schemes, they were not aware of how allocations were made to these schemes. Once this process is understood, they would strategize to influence allocations to schemes that benefited women.

There was then a sharing of some innovative and successful development projects that the CIFT has been engaged with women, like the use of the fish dryer and the cultivation of clams and processing of clam meat.

All sessions were followed by group discussions so that women could digest the inputs and make their responses, which made the programme quite intense and indicated the interest on the part of fisherwomen to understand and share their experiences. Discussions were also held on labour issues within the framework of labour rights in India and other specific legislative provisions like The Street Vendors (Protection of Livelihood and Regulation of Street Vending) Act, 2014, and The

Sexual Harassment of Women at Workplace (Prevention, Prohibition and Redressal) Act, 2013—all important pieces of legislation but not known to many of the participants.

On the concluding day, the state groups worked on their action plans. While sharing them, it emerged that some issues were specific to their regional context while others carried national relevance. The group decided to create a national platform to design a mechanism to take up some of these national issues. To begin with, the platform could take up two major issues: The first was related to budgets, monitoring how much of the budget allocations go to schemes that benefit women, and how they could lobby for this. The second was for the platform to work on demanding enhanced assistance from the state and Central governments to compensate for their non-fishing days, including fishing days lost due to the ban on fishing and fishing days lost due to bad weather conditions.

While the modalities of the functioning of the platform were not discussed, this will hopefully be taken forward in the coming year in order to advance the interests of women in fisheries. 

For more

<https://igsf.icsf.net/en/page/1095-India%20Mainstreaming%20Gender%20and%20Fisheries.html>

National Workshop: The SSF Guidelines and Mainstreaming Gender into Fisheries Policies and Legislation, YWCA of Madras International Guest House, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India, 18 to 20 August 2019

<https://www.icsf.net/en/proceedings/article/EN/163-report-on-works.html?limitstart=0>

Report on Workshop on Enhancing Capacities of Women Fishworkers in India for the Implementation of the SSF Guidelines, Chennai, India, 21-23 November 2016